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POEMS

CLIVE BELL

THE HOGARTH PRESS





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POEMS

CLIVE BELL

*Printed & published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf
at the Hogarth Press, Richmond, Surrey.*

1921



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Most of these verses have appeared in the papers —*The Nation*, *New Statesman*, *Cambridge Magazine* — to the editors of which I tender customary dues. Also, in 1917, a dozen were brought together to make a little book, *Ad Familiares*, of which a hundred copies were printed privately. Of these seventy were immediately distributed amongst my friends, while the remaining thirty have drifted into the hands of curious amateurs who wrote and asked for them. My stock is now exhausted ; but apparently the stock of amateurs is not : for, from time to time, still reach me civil requests for a copy. What can I do ? On the one hand, my vanity is outraged by the idea of people anxious but unable to read me ; on the other, I am too mean to print for their benefit at my own expense. What I have done is to accept with joy an offer by the Hogarth Press to publish a complete edition of my poems — seventeen in number. Thus, in future, without being at pains to write a flattering letter, and at a trifling cost, any amateur can acquire the works of an extremely rare poet.

C. B.

(5)

The CARD HOUSE

And so he laboured very hard,
Piled little card on little card
And laughed to see how well it stood,
How all his work was sure and good
And pretty as a minaret.
He shone with pleasure. "Now I'll set
A jolly cap to crown the thing."
He clapped his hands. Perhaps the fling,
Perhaps the shout was over-daring;
It toppled down while he was staring.
One had to titter, willy-nilly,
To see him look so sad and silly.

1912.

LETTER TO A LADY

A GLI ALBERETTI

VENICE

APRIL, 1913

Here in a garden under vines
Translucent in the mid-day sun,
Washing, green shutters, and the lines
Of the *Salute*, which is fun
And pure baroque to men of taste,
I'm waiting—while the pot-boy chaste
Or chastish since Ignatius Chowne
And J. A. Symonds to this town
Have taught Italian history—waiting,
I say, while he is regulating
A “*conto*” of 12.50—Change
For 50 lire; it is strange
In “*tutto il viale bello*”
In which the shops are small but thrifty
There's not a single honest fellow
To furnish 37.50.

I'm waiting still, and still I ponder,
As I have pondered all the morning,
Out on the blue *Giudecca* yonder,

Under the arches, listless, yawning
Full-mouthed against precocious summer
That's sprung this quick surprise upon us,
And found us out, the sly new-comer,
Tweed-coated, winter-hosed, astonished—
I ponder, knowing all the time
The answer, ponder for the pleasure
Of fitting fancy into rhyme
And matching music with the weather,
What lacks when sea and sky conspire
With form as thin but more romantic
Than that which some of us admire
At Covent Garden,—Transatlantic
Cousins still call it monumental,
But we know better—sentimental
People divine a riddle basking
Under its marble,—never mind them,
Be sure they'll come, their tales behind them,
Safe home to Chelsea. Still I'm asking :
“What's lacking yet?” The Spring's awake,
Each palace curtsies to her neighbour,
Each gondolier's a handsome rake,
Each mouth-organ a dulcet tabor ;
What can I want when Venice plays
And Time's a song, and Fate's a dancer,
And Life drifts gaily down her ways,
What's lacking, Madame? Can you answer?

To A. V. S. WITH A BOOK

Books are the quiet monitors of mind,
They prompt its motions, shape its ways, they find
A road through mazes to the higher ground,
Whence to explore the sky-bound marches. Round
About us lie the open downs. Our days
Still ask a guide and goad. Wherefore always
We meditate wise thoughts and passionate lays ;
Wherefore I send a book.

Books are the mind's last symbol. They express
Its visions and its subtleties—a dress
Material for the immaterial things
That soar to immortality on wings
Of words, and live, by magic of the pen,
Where dead minds live, upon the lips of men
And deep in hearts that stir. Wherefore do I,
Drawing a little near, prophetically,
Send you a book.

Books are the heart's memorial. They shall
measure,
In after days, our undiscovered treasure,—
Thrilling self-knowledge, half-divined untold
Yearnings, and tongueless agonies, shall unfold
Or half unfold to half-illumined eyes.
The cypress shadows creeping gnomonwise

Still stretch their purple fingers down the hill
That hangs above Fiesole; and still
Your English fireside glows. Do you most dear—
Sometimes just guessed at, sometimes very near—
Yet always dear and fairest friend, do you
Recall the sunlight and the firelight too?
Recall the pregnant hours, the gay delights,
The pain, the tears maybe, the ravished heights,
The golden moments my cold lines commend,
The days, in memory of which I send
A book?

DEC. 1909.

MYSELF TO MYSELF

It was the thrush's song I heard
To-day, in March. And you who came
At life through books, whom poets stirred
To love of beauty, who the name
Of art revered and fancy knew
From earliest days,—why, how should you
Guess at my feelings when among
The elms I heard the thrush's song?

For you the country means a mood,
Recalls a poem, lays a scene ;
For you its beauties are more good
Sometimes than paintings : it has been
Music to calm or move you, still
A background to your thought and will.

Nothing for me the country means :
It is. The thrush's earliest song
In the precocious sunshine cleans
My soul of culture. Comes along
The acrid smell of daffodil,
Hard from the soil still wet and chill.

These do not mean. I am content
To look or listen, passion spent,
Far beyond art and thought, and free
From Vanity and Jealousy,
As free as flower, or bird, or tree,
Not to mean anything, but be.

1901.

(12)

SPRING

The sun crept into the peaceful earth
And troubled her dream of fair content ;
He tempted the timorous blossoms to birth,
The poor pink fools that laughing went
Naked to meet him, their leaves without,
And the meddlesome bees droned round and about.

The sober grey that shrouded the head
Of the pensive sea he ravished away ;
He twitched it from her, and gave instead
The libertine breezes who ruffle her day ;
Who tease and tousle and toss anew
Her mourning garment of exquisite blue.

He cozened the mud-flies out on the heath,
Ephemeral butterflies opened their wings ;
The credulous birds from their mates beneath
Caught up the catch that Eternity sings—
Sings to the Echoes in Fools' Paradise—
“Shall not our folly befool the wise ?”

APRIL 1903.

REPLY TO MRS. JOWITT

WHO SENT ME A PIECE OF GOOD NEWS

IN A RHYMED LETTER

Wittering, April 1915

When all the world was very good
(So says the nursery rhyme)
The fairy Fays and Mays who stood
As godmothers, from time to time,
Would give their virtuous picaninnies
A golden goblet filled with guineas.

That was the golden age: and nurse
Declared that ours grew worse and worse
("Don't bite the spoon, Miss Leslie!")
Yet I believe that fairies still
Can fill a cup, and over-fill,—
At any rate in Chelsea.

Telling good news is reckoned kind
(Except when Germans tell it,)
To wrap it in a pleasant rind
Of song was thought angelic
By the good shepherds, and by me
A piece of sweet *diablerie*.

One cavil : though it ill becomes
One who has in his time
Bedragged the depths and skimmed the scums
To catch a dubious rhyme,
To scold a poetess who fell
And, though she knew she shouldn't,
Wrote down a name that rhymed with "well"
Instead of one that wouldn't,
Yet, frankly, tuneful, erring sister,
Can one be musical to "Mister"?

A monosyllable, I confess,
Is what the Muse prefers :
She cut a queen's name down to Bess
And yours is worse than hers :
Meanwhile it takes a better poet
Than I to deal with Mrs. Jowitt.

To GERALD SHOVE

I like to let my fancy rove
O'er all the charms of Mister Shoave.
But oh ! how very much above
Such obvious charms are those of Shuv.

Oh Shuv most intimate ! Oh Shoave
More pompous-fine ! Yet interwove,
How complex-sweet and meet for love
The compound name of Gerald Shuv.

Oh Gerald dear ! Oh Shuv ! Oh Shoave !
My late-found bliss, my treasure-trove ;
My poor heart yearns to counter-prove
Those double facets that me move
So strangely ; therefore, deign t' approve
This syncretism—Gerald Shoove.

1912.

MARCH

If I could catch all the stars in a net
And make them tell me their Christian names,
Or snare the dream of a violet,
Or persuade the squirrels to teach me their games,
Or quite surprise, on a warm June night,
The lilac bushes that laugh for delight
And tremble for fear lest we should hear them,—
If I could tiptoe breathlessly near them
And overhear them
And master so
Secrets that only the lilacs know :
If I could feel what a young bird feels
When first it flutters across the road,
Or learn at last from the creaking wheels
Of a wagon that story they tell their load—
The hillside legend that never grows old :
If I could be told
All the subtle, impalpable, exquisite things
That we just surmise when the country sings,
That week before they begin the hay :
If I could contrive to sing, or to say,
Or to be, what the poets have never invented,
Should I be contented ?
Was I to-day ?

1915.

APRIL

After so many days . . .
The moon lies right across the sea,
 The tide's up to the brink,
A door keeps flapping in the wind,
 I cannot sleep a wink,
Although I'm sleepy as can be,
 But lie in bed and think
Of you and all your proud, gay ways.

1915.

JUNE

They say you are the latest, loveliest jest
Of some transmigratory ghost,
The last embodiment, and best,
Of some small being—tell me, are you most
Yourself when most
A squirrel or jerboa?
Or rather,
Since you are tender, humorous, and wise,
Is yours the spirit of some steadier goer,
A grave, cautious donkey, whose wide eyes
See, far away, the thin ambiguous towers,
Nor miss the pebbly road nor truant flowers—
See farther,
And less painfully, than ours?
Or, as I think,
Have you, like some
Too curious spirit peering from the East,
O'erleant the ramparts of your little town
In Fairyland; and from the brink
Of The Impossible tumbled down
To where we now uneasily surmise
Your vagrant figure, trailing Sirenwise—
Strayed reveller, from some fairy banquet come
To sow sedition at our sober feast?

1915.

(19)

OCTOBER

O up the hill and down the hill
And all across the ferry,
Avid as bees under the trees—
Probably they'll be merry :

And back again, under the rain,
As wild as wind-tossed plovers,
Wet and chill and enchanted still—
I fear they must be lovers.

1915.

DECEMBER

In some few years, when you and I—
Perhaps in some few months—shall lie,
Where lie at last everyone must,
Little will it approve our dust
That one shall write above our tombs :
“They gave their days to glums and glooms.”

Much rather had I someone said :
“They loved to wantonness, these dead.”
“They kissed too much,” I’d have one say,
“Until they kissed their souls away.
Still they were young, and, lip to lip,
They found a way to make Time skip ;
And they were bold enough to find
A way to brave him, mind to mind ;
And sometimes, by their deadly art,
They caught and crushed him, heart to heart.”

This elegy methinks becomes
Us better than our glooms and glums.

1915.

LETTER TO A LADY

SEPT. 1916.

No : I was not made for love ;
I was made for easier things,
Ecstasies on paper wings,
Agonies that end in laughter
—Smoke or kisses coming after—
Not for love.

I was made for airy thinking,
Nimble sallies, champagne-drinking,
Badinage and argument,
Reading's infinite content,
Ill-considered merriment,
Friendship, anything but love.

Made for singing little songs,
Made for righting little wrongs,
Made to taste whate'er there be
Of loveliness and gaiety
On this variegated earth ;
Made for sentiment and mirth
And light romance, perhaps just worth
A smile from Art, a nod from Truth,
I, apt for a fantastic youth
Of follies, an old age of thought,

And never thinking to be caught
As now I am, said "Never mind
Love; for Love, you know, is blind."
I was made with eyes to see,
And taste to choose fastidiously,
And ears to hear, enough of brain
To make most matters fairly plain,
Enough of health for work or play,
Of wealth enough to pick my way,
Sense to enjoy, and arts to bring
Soft nothings off a softer thing,
A turn of wit, a taste for ease,
And what had love to do with these?

I was made to revel in
The viola and violin,
The broad bassoon and clarinette,
From every art devised to get
Its complement of melody:
Believe me, I was meant to be
One who smiled back at smiling faces,
A loiterer in life's pleasant places,
A well of receptivity.

I was contrived by God to pull
The noses of the very dull;
Tweak up as 'twere a cotton gown
The law most solemnly laid down;
Expressly charged to mock the great

And weather-cockwise still girate,
To choose a rose and praise a frill,
And sometimes cause a tiny thrill,
To be a lover in my fashion--
But O ! I was not made for passion.

Therefore, dear Lady, if you please
Deal very gingerly with these.
Here is our garden : O, take care
Our passion spoil not our parterre.
Be gracious, Madame, lest your frown
Should bake the lawns and burn them brown,
Be very kind, or jealous showers
May quite dash down our scented flowers,
And O ! be chary of reproof,
Remember I'm not made for love.

TO LOPOKOVA DANCING

Is it true?
Are Ariel's whims
Embodyed in your artful limbs?
And Puck, they say, betrayed you all his lore:
Did he? Are you—
As now to me at any rate you seem,
Twisting a Longhi into fun and air,—
Are you, perhaps, that unpropounded theme
Of playfulness Mozart forgot to score,
As lyrical and debonair and new
And fair?
The rhythm snaps. Surely I caught you there?
You are, at least I'm almost sure you were,
Some truant from the lesser Piero's store,
A living Procne by a livelier shore,
Where lustier satyrs ply remorselessly
More pagan antics by a bluer sea,
A sea as frankly unmysterious
As Theocritus.

1918.

AFTER ASCLEPIADES

‘Ηδὺ θέρους διψῶντι χιὰν ποτόν . . .

O iced gin-slings are pretty good in Ascot week
at tea,
And, though no poet, I protest lilacs have bloom-
ed for me:
But when beneath one baldaquin two bees are but
one sting,
The lilacs and the juniper are quite another thing.

1921.

THE LAST INFIRMITY

Then tell me this, how must I praise you, dear
And desperate doubter of all pleasant things—
Infidel to yourself—who neither clear,
Untroubled truth, nor chequered flatteries,
Nor love's tried tales and trusted sorceries,
Will hear?

In vain the throstle sings,
Roses are red in vain, and sunlight fair :
For all that amorous armoury of words,
Which poets forge themselves from ecstasy,
For all youth's uncontrived *naiseries*,
Melodious similes of flowers and birds,
For well-found compliment or unfeigned prayer,
You do not care.

You are the last word of a thousand years,
Fine fleur of Europe's slow civility.
All subtlest products of her ceaseless toils,
The middle ages' mystic gaiety,
The gorgeous hubris of Italian dawn,
The slow maturing vintage of its spoils,
What Titian dreamed of, what Velasquez guessed,
Rambouillet played with, Versailles half expressed,
You are the heir to : and to you have gone
Voltaire's thin smiles and *Prévost*'s prettiest tears.

Listen ! You are that mystery,
That still life that just lies
Below the surface. Sometimes you'd surmise,

So smooth, so silently, the stream goes by,
That it were dead : but, peering past the brink,
An inch below the glass you catch a wink,
A twist, the thrilling sense of flow.
And there ! And there ! And see the green weeds
blow
And strain against the strong, subaqueous wind.
So, just beneath that faint, diaphanous snow,
Your skin, it flutters pulsewise : now behind
That bright brown eye stays frozen ; now afar
Mocks our dull inquisition that would know
What life is, what you are.

1921.

ΠΑΝΤΩΝ ΤΑΤΚΤΑΤΟΝ ΜΕΤΑΒΟΛΗ.

Frankly, I do not greatly care
Always to be my best ;
I like sometimes to take the air,
Sometimes to take a rest.

Sometimes, austere philosopher,
I scan what thought reveals :
At other times I much prefer
Silk stockings and high heels.

And sometimes Beauty moves me much,
And sometimes Pleasure more :
Great Art seems sometimes Double Dutch,
And Amabel a bore.

Is God's clock always just at noon ?
Is Heaven always fair ?
May angels not adore the moon ?
Is there no tea-time there ?

Why, then, how blest are we on earth,
Who know an ampler range,
With blondes and browns and grief and mirth
And, above all things, Change.



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